

REMARKS  
ON  
DR ABERCROMBIE'S SUGGESTIONS  
ON THE  
CHARACTERS AND TREATMENT  
OF THE  
MALIGNANT CHOLERA.  
BY A YOUNG PHYSICIAN.

Most medical men seem to me to be very like unskilful pilots, whose errors escape detection while the sea is calm and the wind favourable, but when the storm and tempest overtake them, wreck and ruin ensue, and instantly their ignorance is made manifest to all; so, in ordinary seasons, when the prevalent diseases are generally so slight that the patients recover in spite of bad treatment, the obsequious herd of knavish practitioners win the confidence of the deluded public, but should a pestilence arise, then their craft and their incompetence become fatally conspicuous, and their well earned punishment is at hand.

HIPPOCRATES, *De Prisca Medicina*.

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TO

THE MEDICAL MEN OF THE HOTEL-DIEU, PARIS.

GENTLEMEN,

YOUR labours have enriched our science ; your knowledge has added dignity to our profession ; your liberal conduct has held out an example to all. You have never persecuted a professional brother for publishing his investigations.

You have, by banishing the demon Contagion, preserved the commerce of your country ; and, what is still more grateful to your feelings, you have ensured the uninterrupted exercise of those private sympathies, charities, and good offices, which soothe calamity, and strengthen the bonds of society.

To you, therefore, as a small tribute of esteem and respect, are dedicated the following pages, by

Your admirer and former pupil,

THE AUTHOR.

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## REMARKS, &c.

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SOME men write to afford instruction,—some amusement—and some, it would seem, to make themselves ridiculous; it will not be difficult to determine in which class to place our author, who is no less a personage than First Physician in Ordinary to the King for Scotland, reputed medical leader of the Board of Health, President of the Medico-Chirurgical Society, &c.

The brochure begins: “The slight *and imperfect suggestions*, which I am about to offer, are chiefly the *result of communications* which I had from Sunderland, Newcastle, and Haddington. Though *they may contain little that is new*, they may be worthy of being laid before the profession, as *the latest observations of intelligent British practitioners*, who have treated, to some extent, this formidable disease.

“In regard to the history and progress of Cholera, a point of the first practical importance

seems to be now clearly made out,—namely, that the disease is distinctly *referable to three stages*.”

The first paragraph is a precious specimen of our author's best manner. We have *slight and imperfect suggestions the result of communications*; and *though containing little new*, yet the *latest observations of certain practitioners*! So that his suggestions are the observations of others! If this is not his meaning, we might be curious to learn, whether it is the suggestions, the communications, the latest observations, or all of them, which “may contain little that is new;” and if they are all slight, imperfect, and nearly antiquated, how do they become worthy of being laid before the profession? It is fortunate that he still lives to give the solution, as his works are doubtless destined to posterior utility.

The second paragraph is of a diction equally select. What should we think of a mathematician who told us, that a whole is referable to its parts? This disease, according to our nosologist, is referable to its stages.

The first stage he calls *premonitory*, which epithet may be here very significant, though to us it is unintelligible. Premonitory of what?—of itself? this is absurd:—of the disease? then it is not a stage:—of what is to follow? this may be equally affirmed of the second stage in relation to

the third, or of the part above quoted in relation to the sequel of the Doctor's ingenious suggestions.

We are sorry, at the very outset, to be obliged to impeach the memory or the candour of our author: we agree with him, that the first stage is of the greatest practical importance; but we cannot allow either him, or any of his correspondents, the merit of discovering or pointing it out. If he had said, the existence of this stage is now generally admitted, but it was first clearly insisted upon in a letter addressed by Dr Sanders, of this city, to Sir Henry Hallford, Bart. published on the 16th of November last, we should have considered this fair dealing towards a contemporary, which would be no small commendation to any man in these times, when we might say with Waller,—

What use of oaths, of promise, or of test,

Where men regard no god but interest?

The symptoms of this malady required only to be copied, yet our author has omitted some of the most important. The detail given is characteristic, not of the disease, but of the narrator,—such as “an *irritable state* of the bowels, perhaps *to the extent of three or four evacuations* ;” “pain and *tenderness shooting* across the region of the stomach.” We find, not that the aspect is like that of one exhausted, but that “*the aspect is exhausted*,”—that the stomach is “*more or less irritable*.” Now, as this is true of



the stomach at all times, he might have affirmed at once, that the patient had a stomach.

Brevity is good,

Whether we are, or are not understood.

We are told likewise, that “the skin, especially on the *hands, fingers, and feet*, is remarkably cold,”—to shew, that those affected with this disease have no toes, or that their fingers are out of place; and the matter vomited is said to be of a “white rice water appearance,”—to distinguish it, no doubt, from black or blue rice, which he may have discovered.

No pains are spared to embellish his style; but, as his grammar and dictionary are not those of the English, or of any known language, we are unable to expose its beauties.

Having detailed the symptoms, this skilful physician proceeds to the treatment as follows:—“In *alluding* briefly to the treatment of Cholera, I abstain, on all material points, from any conjectures of my own, and confine myself to *what has been represented to me*, by highly intelligent friends, who have treated the disease in this country, as the *treatment which has appeared to them* to be the most successful.”

Whom could a treatment, founded on so sure a basis as *the representation of an appearance*, not inspire with confidence? The Doctor is quite satisfied with it; and, accordingly, we have no other rules



for the treatment than a congeries of what this man or that man said, or rather dreamt about it. We shall give the first part as an example, and *ex uno disce omnia*: “When the patient *is seen* in the first stage, a moderate bleeding from the arm *seems, in general,* to be useful, especially if there is much pain across the region of the stomach. This is *usually* followed by an emetic, composed of a dessert-spoonful of the flour of mustard, in half a tumbler of tepid water. When there is spontaneous vomiting, *some still give the mustard, while others content themselves* with clearing out the stomach by draughts of warm water, or warm infusion of chamomile.”

What rule of treatment is given here?

A l'œuvre on connaît l'artisan.

We are informed, page 8th, “If the patient is not seen till the second stage has been fully formed, *the treatment is much more doubtful,* and in a large proportion of cases, *no remedies are of any avail.* The indications of treatment which we require to keep in view, seem to be chiefly *referable to two heads,—namely, to rally the system out of the state of collapse, and to act, as far as we have the means, upon the primary disease.*”

The Doctor here is perfectly right,—“two heads are better than one.” We could wish the learned gentleman to explain to us a *doubtful treatment,*—

how *no remedies* could ever be of *any* avail, —and how we could proceed farther than our means, on any occasion.

After informing us that “the extremities should be particularly *attended to, by hot vessels* to the feet;” that “these means may be assisted by fomentations, or cloths soaked in *warm* oil of turpentine, laid over the abdomen as *hot* as they can be borne;” and that “*the hot air bath* may not be so useful in this country, unless *it* be combined with other means,” &c. —he adds, “During this period of the disease, *small opiates* are to be given with caution; various forms may answer equally well, as two of the opiate pills of the *Edinburgh Pharmacopæia*, a grain of opium, with two or three grains of camphor,” &c. The observation, that opiates require to be given with caution, is very commendable, and therefore corresponds well with the rest; nor does our author seem ignorant of its merits, as he introduces it frequently. The latter part of the sentence is too deep for us.

He treats of blood-letting in the stage of collapse—calls it “one of the most delicate questions in the whole treatment of the disease”—then makes some observations on the subject, quite as instructive as those which he usually makes—and concludes without stating whether we ought to bleed or not.

Next, he recommends “to keep in view such

*remedies as we have in our power*”—amuses with his grammatical and verbal peculiarities—and then sums up the treatment of the second stage by generalizing. Take a specimen:—“ In regard to the whole of the second stage, it is of much consequence to observe, that *opiates require to be given with much caution, and that even the use of stimulants requires some discretion.* For, by doing too much in both these respects, especially the former, during the state of great collapse, there is reason to believe that the system may be overpowered instead of being rallied, and also that *the subsequent stage of reaction* is made more severe and more dangerous. A large proportion of the cases that are met with in *this* stage, indeed, *assume* such characters as set at nought all human aid. This seems to be particularly the case in persons who have been broken down by habits of intemperance. Such, as I have already stated, were at least four-fifths of the fatal cases that occurred in Had-dington. In these it was found that *no combination* of stimulants arrested for a moment the downward progress of the disease. Bleeding was practised extensively in these *cases*, but *they* never succeeded in obtaining a sufficient quantity of blood, or any change in its appearance.”

Though we like this sentence very much, and admire the remarks as to *caution, discretion, and doing too much*, yet, *inter multa alia*, we admit that,

by our grammarian's use of *this*, the people of Haddington are represented as dying during the stage of reaction, instead of during that of collapse. The author says, a *proportion assume*, for *assumes*; nor is this the only fault of the same kind in the sixteen pages. A celebrated modern writer observes, "That an error is an error, and that it cannot be more; and that he who cannot avoid one error cannot avoid another; that he writes by guess, and not by principle and rule; and that herein consists the difference between the learned and the illiterate."

Proceeding with his wonted felicity, he favours us with such phrases as, "*to keep in view, in the prospect of having,*" (which prospect has great influence on some men,)—seems to make a power, a tendency—quotes the valuable authority of an intelligent captain of a merchant vessel—and makes the London Paregoric a member of the Faculty.

Though our author does not attempt to

Coin or counterfeit

New words with little or no wit,

yet he sometimes takes great liberty with old ones: the word *case* exhibits a choice example. In page 15, *case* means the *history* of the patient's disorder; in page 8, *cases* are the *patients themselves*; and in the paragraph just quoted, *cases* are *medical men* in active practice.

The author promised us slight and imperfect suggestions; but, after perusing his publication,

we have discovered *no intellectual powers*—no induction from facts—no suggestion that throws the least glimpse of light on the characters and treatment of Cholera. What is our disappointment when a man interposes the opacity of his brain between us and an object, and leaves us in utter darkness !

In order, we suppose, to give more interest to his performance, he introduces a change of subject, and finishes—“ In regard to the whole of the *anxious investigation* which is before us, I would respectfully propose to my professional brethren, *an extensive and confidential system of mutual intelligence and aid*. For this purpose, a plan of returns has been arranged by the medical members of the Board of Health, which will be speedily communicated to the gentlemen of the profession. Relying on the knowledge which I have of their zeal, and their talents, I anticipate, from such a system, the most important consequences, both to the cause of humanity and of science. To give it the greater efficiency, I would propose that two or three individuals shall be appointed to receive communications of a practical nature, and that these should publish occasional reports of such information as may seem to be of immediate and practical importance. By such means, I trust we shall be enabled, under *Divine Providence*, to discharge more efficiently our duty to the public, in the



period of intense anxiety to which we are approaching, and to contribute something to the pathology and the treatment of this most obscure and formidable disease."

This conclusion, where nothing is concluded, is a feeble show of the love of science, which the cynical would designate affectation; it converts the *slight and imperfect suggestions of the author into anxious investigation*, and proposes, among his professional brethren, "*an extensive and confidential system of mutual intelligence.*" This is elegant! *intelligence for correspondence.* That the Doctor needs *intelligence*, we do not question; but intellect is a necessary preliminary. For the use of the adjective *mutual*, we refer him to Mylne's Epitome of English Grammar,—an excellent book for children. We have here also notice of a plan of returns. The said plan has since been developed, in a circular issued by the Board of Health, in which "the general revision of the whole" is confided to Dr A. as being the most profound among them, of course, in grammatical science and literary composition. We take this opportunity to deprecate the abuse of terms consecrated to the attributes of Omnipotence. In the manifesto of Nicholas, for the spoliation and annihilation of Poland, we have *Divine Providence*; in public advertisements, *Divine Providence*; in this peroration of Dr A., *Divine Providence!* The Jews will not mention the appropriate name of the

Deity except in synagogue, or on solemn occasions : this is true respect and veneration ; but in the bandying of such appellations, men truly serious are disposed to see nothing but heedless profanation, or studied hypocrisy. It reminds us of a dialogue between Cant and Plain, much in vogue in the sixteenth century :

*Cant.* — Who will unveil the mystery, pray, if I can't ?

*Plain.* — Methinks, sir, you always cant, but you never unveil any thing !

Had this essay been anonymous, one would have said, If it is the production of a schoolboy, let him be whipped for his blunders in grammar ; if of a surgeon's apprentice, let him be dismissed, because he has neither education nor capacity for the profession : but, in the present instance, the mistakes in grammar are to be ascribed to haste ; and as to the professional skill and science of the author, they are unquestionable.

It may be urged, that Dr A. is a voluminous writer—that his works have been favourably reviewed—and that he has obtained great celebrity : we rejoin, that, in the present age, it is easy for any man to make books of any size he pleases, on any given subject. With regard to reviews in general, we have this to say in their praise, that they do not deceive any man of common sense. The Doctor declares himself solicitous to be benefited by the labours of others, and this disposition is



laudable ; but information honestly obtained, and ingenuously acknowledged, implies virtues for which few modern authors are remarkable. We, also, are solicitous of information ; and, accordingly, we shall feel much indebted to any person, who will produce one octavo page of the composition of our author free from palpable errors in the use or application of words, or even one thought of any value really his.

In fine, he is but little acquainted with the world who has not found celebrity to be a very ambiguous criterion. So much is effected by cabal, intrigue, and faction, that there is nothing more difficult than to form a just estimate of merit. Hence it is, that some men, who were long obscured by the foul breath of calumny, rise to undisputed eminence ; while others who enjoyed a great, yet meretricious reputation, sink into contempt. — the earth hath bubbles as the water hath."

If any independent journalist had done justice to this pamphlet, we should not have taken notice of it ; but as foreigners and strangers seem to think, that the writings of Dr A. furnish a fair test of the talents and attainments of the medical profession in Scotland, we wish to vindicate the honour of our country.

THE END.